

its weakest, most precarious part

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Summary: He'd thoughtâ€"rationalisedâ€"then, after the funeral, when the neatly folded uniform was handed to him by a soldier whose name he knew but couldn't pronounce, what good would old, worn out clothes do to Kircheis' parents?

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He keeps the clothes in a separate drawer, in the wardrobe of his room, squeezed between the one that keeps his own and the one where necessities lie. He shouldn't have kept them: ceremony dictated the clothes be returned to the parents of the deceased, or they be disposed of in the absence of relatives. He'd been buried in a High Admiral's uniform tailored for the occasion so his former ones remained and he was too selfish to let them go. He'd thoughtâ€"rationalisedâ€"then, after the funeral, when the neatly folded uniform was handed to him by a soldier whose name he knew but couldn't pronounce, what good would old, worn out clothes do to Kircheis' parents? They were a reminder that the militaryâ€"which he joined even though he didn't have the character for itâ€"had killed him before he kept his promises. Instead, he had use for them. Though he could be sure the old coupleâ€"gentle and kind like himâ€"would never dare think it, the clothes would remind them that Reinhardâ€"not the kaiser but the blonde boy who moved in next doorâ€"had pushed Kircheis into it. That he hadn't even had the deference to let them hear the news from him and it was his fault. He had use for the clothes in order to avoid this. No one could think it. Even though he knew the couple would never.

He should've disposed of them, let the clothes be taken away when Fraulein Mariendorfâ€"so attentive, like she was worried Reinhard would break even though there was no way for her to knowâ€"offered to do it herself. He should've and instead he'd made a violent movement with his left arm and told her he could do it himself and shut the door behind him.

They (he repeated the word: it was them), they had already pried him

away from Reinhard, why shouldn't he keep his clothes, folded and neat and hidden inside the drawer next to his, like the ship at the docks, like the locket on his neck, like the letter on his desk, like a token of the rooms they had shared, the bedsheets under which they'd faced the worst winters when everyone in the academy looked down on them and no warmth existed but their own.

No one looks down on him now, now that he owns everything, rules over everyone, so he deserved to keep the clothes just like he'd kept the letters, written in that messy caligraphy of his, the one that gave away his early education, so different from Reinhard's. An entire life—ten years—lived without knowing each other, so much time that it didn't make any sense, because now it was impossible.

But he doesn't take them out often.

Sometimes, when time and politics allow, he opens the drawer, drags one palm over the soft fabric feeling its creases, remembers the way it felt and looked against his body, his skin, then closes it again and leaves the room.

Sometimes he even remembers how it felt to touch the same fabric when it clung to the body when he is nowhere near the uniform.

He wonders if it is a punishment.

But he made his own fate.

He'd won the universe.

And then he has to wonder—and he laughs and maybe Kircheis would've worried if he knew Reinhard could laugh like that, as if he hated who he is—if he inflicts all of this on himself. Imagining the touch and the scent and everything that reminds him of the happiness he knew when Kircheis sat at the small round table on the place they had called home—just the two of them, their own—and looked at him and saw him and was there. And he has to wonder whether this torture comes because he let go of the only thing he'd ever held certain—that he would've given his life for Kircheis, would've given up his dream—and lost what was worth more than the universe. Or if it came because he once believed—and he laughs again—that he could bring happiness to those he loved. It doesn't matter either way, Kircheis following, still following him wherever he goes is enough to let him keep moving forward, because even if the corner of his lips ache, at least he's still able to smile and others believe it. (He wouldn't have believed it, though).

Sometimes, too, he uses both hands and, as carefully as he would handle a sacred artifact, takes the black uniform out of the drawer, softly traces the seams, the texture, places it on the bed; unfolded trousers, smoothed out of any crease; unfolded shirt, positioned just above the trousers, to mark the place where his body would be if Kircheis were the one lying on that bed and not an empty carcass of clothes. And he runs his hands along the uniform, concentrates himself on smoothing out the wrinkles of the fabric—how it felt when it had held skin and organs and life—kept himself from thinking about skin and organs and life and how he struggles with breathing and seeing and life.

There are also times in which nostalgia subsides, when there is no

grief, and he can look at their shared childhood, adolescence, and it doesn't sting, it doesn't make him angry, not with himself, and not with Kircheis, and not with anyone else who has ever existed. But mostly he tries not to think too much. Clutching the locket whenever he feels alone, in need of guidance, he forces his mind to concentrate on the tasks at hand: battles when they are happening, politics when they are brought up, conversations when others seek him; anything that isn't loss. Anything that isn't anger. Anything that doesn't tell him he did this on purpose, that he left his uniform behind, his skin, his organs, his life, because he was too much of a coward to carry the weight of their sins; too weak and too kind and too afraid of what they might become. But mostly, above all, he tries not to think too much, concentrate on anything that doesn't tell him that the weight was always his, not Kircheis', that he was the weak one, but not kind, and not afraid, and became what Kircheis feared and had let it happen, had wanted it even, and Kircheis had left and let him do it, too. At least they shared that guilt, he thinks, and then tries to forget.

Then he takes the belt, the small piece of leather that clasped his waist once, always, that was been touched by his hands, that was unbuckled countless times by Kircheis, by himself, and had been so trivial—and so in the way at desperate times when it was too urgent because an explosion had almost almost threatened their lives and Reinhard needed Kircheis to promise again again that he would not ever die before him—and is now so important, and places the belt on the trousers, unbuckles it and buckles it up again.

And he lies down on the bed, next to the uniform, careful not to wrinkle it, not to disturb it in any way, and laughs because Kircheis would laugh. A grown man playing with the clothes of his dead friend. A dead friend who never was the one to reach out and touch—it was always Reinhard and he still resents it and he hadn't even known he resented it until there was no one to reach out to anymore—a dead friend who would've laughed at the most powerful man in the universe, who would've defied the most powerful man in the universe, who would've told him everything he did wrong, all of it. And Reinhard would've hated him for it, just as he hates him now, for leaving, for being a coward, for being too weak to bear the weight of their sins, for keeping the promise to his sister, for not keeping the promise to him, for not being more than a locket, and a uniform, and letters in messy caligraphy that gave advice and screamed "I know you miss me" but never said they missed him too.

Memory changes spaces and feelings as it sees fit, he knows. Reinhard's memory tells stories he'd been blind to—Kircheis smiling at his sister while Reinhard did a handstand on the lawn, a smile that made Reinhard want to cry and lash out and destroy everything until only the three of them existed and they were forced not to make him feel invisible. It tells stories his memory alone concocted—Kircheis smiling kindly at the old man who called him Marquis von Lohengramm, smiling kindly when Reinhard said the mistake was perfectly fine because Kircheis was the same as himself and Kircheis repeating, yes, the same as yourself, not a subject, not loyal in that way, the same. But it doesn't matter, really, because they are there now, hidden in the dust that settled onto the uniform and itches his nose, waters his eyes, adding weight to the chain of the locket, fading the ink on the paper where a child had written words a man should utter.

End
file.